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Errata

Unfortunately an older file of the Index was printed in this Issue. In this file years 24 and 25 have not been sorted and the following entry has been omitted:

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Book Review

John Stott, *Why I Am A Christian* (Leicester: IVP, 2003), £7-99, pp.149, ISBN 9-780851-114071. Reviewed by Stephen N. Williams

Renewing our vision for the future of Protestant Christianity in Northern Ireland

A lecture given in Fitzroy Presbyterian Church, Belfast, on 4 December 2003 to mark the 150th anniversary of Union Theological College, Belfast.

Alister McGrath

The article explores the current challenges faced by Northern Irish Protestantism in the light of the rise of postmodern culture, and the changing political situation within the Province. It then offers an analysis of three major ways in which the churches might rise to this challenge through retrieving aspects of their heritage, and applying it to the contemporary situation.

It is a great pleasure to be able to return to Belfast and celebrate the founding of Union College, one of Presbyterianism's most distinguished schools of learning, one hundred and fifty years ago. While I was a schoolboy at the Methodist College, Belfast, back in the 1960s, both that college and this church in which we gather tonight were important landmarks as I walked around this city, and it is a great privilege to be able to speak to you here tonight. I may add that it is exceptionally generous of a Presbyterian foundation to invite an Anglican to speak to them! I have chosen a large and difficult theme for my lecture tonight – one that cannot possibly be addressed in the time at my disposal. Yet I felt it was the right question to ask at this time in the history of this province, at a time of rapid change and uncertainty about the future. What place does that future hold for Protestant Christianity?

In thinking about the future, it is helpful to be reminded of the past. Since the reign of Elizabeth I, Protestantism has been a living presence in this region. During the 1850s and 1860s, many visionary figures realized the importance of consolidating the Protestant heritage, and began to lay the foundations of many institutions which have flourished to this day. Union College was founded in 1853; the Methodist College in 1868, originally founded – remember! – both as a school and a seminary. We often think of

the Victorian era as a time of great stability for the Christian faith in general, and Protestantism in particular. Yet the clouds were gathering. What historians like to call “the Victorian crisis of faith” was beginning to gain momentum, and cast its long and lingering shadows over church life throughout the United Kingdom – including here, in this city.

I do not wish to spend much time talking about this development, but we must note at least some of its features. Many writers of the period believed that they were standing at the threshold of a new age, uncertain of what it might bring, yet suspecting that the old ways of thinking were on their way out. In his Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse, written around this time, Matthew Arnold (1822-88) spoke of being caught . . .

Between two worlds, one dead,
The other powerless to be born,
With nowhere to lay my head.

Arnold’s journey through the Alps is the backdrop against which he explores his sense of displacement, focusing especially on the erosion of faith in his culture – and perhaps even in himself. His once robust faith, he comments, more than a little wistfully, now seems “but a dead time’s exploded dream.” Arnold expresses a sense of melancholy and sadness over his nation’s loss of faith, which he saw pathetically mirrored in the ebbing of the tide on Dover beach:

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl’d.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar.

That tide was now ebbing, and Arnold never expected to see it return. The sea of faith that once was at its full is now in retreat. All that he can hear is its “melancholy, long, withdrawing roar”.

This process was well under way when Union College was founded. Those who founded that college knew that nothing was to be gained

merely by lamenting what they saw happening in culture at large. And burying their heads in the sand. Something needed to be done. The important thing, in their view, was to produce leadership for their churches that was deeply rooted in the Christian faith, yet capable of engaging with the new challenges that were emerging, with more presumed to be over the horizon. And we, in our time, also face cultural changes – changes that we do not fully understand, that we do not seem able to resist, and which we sense are laden with significance for the future of Protestantism.

This is no idle question. While we must never overstate the changes we see happening around us, something is unquestionably happening which is changing the face of this province. We might use words such as “globalization” or “postmodernity” to try and catch something of the new mood that seems to be gaining ground, especially among younger members of the community. But whatever is going on, and however we are to account for it – tasks which I gladly leave to others – we are seeing the emergence of a new cultural mood, which impatient with many of the things that we have taken for granted.

All of us in the west – whether in England, the United States, or in Northern Ireland – can identify with these cultural changes which are often described using words such as “secularisation” and others like it. Yet Protestants in Northern Ireland face an additional challenge, which has, in my view, no exact parallel elsewhere in Great Britain. In this province, Protestantism has played a substantial – often decisive – social and political role, giving a sense of identity to a large section of the population of Northern Ireland. The nearest equivalent to this is probably in the United States of America, especially in the southern states, where religious identity – both Protestant and Roman Catholic – continues to be a major factor in shaping society. Yet in Northern Ireland, there are signs everywhere that a rising younger generation has certain misgivings about such traditional roles. If Protestant Christianity defines itself in terms of being the custodian of certain social and cultural values, what happens if rapid social and cultural change erodes those values?

I can remember very clearly, as a boarder at Methody, seeing flickering black and white television news coverage of the events in Londonderry of Saturday 5 October 1968, and wondering where this was going to take us. Thirty-five years later, I think that it is fair to say that it is still not clear. Yet what is clear is that a growing number of people – not all of them younger – are finding settled understandings of the role of Protestant Christianity problematic. While I have many difficulties with the writings of postmodern theorists such as Michel Foucault, I must admit that I cannot help but notice the importance of one aspect of their thinking that seems intensely relevant to our topic tonight – namely, the idea of “binary” identification, in which a group is identified by contrast with another. In the Northern Ireland context, there is no doubt as to the nature of this binary system: Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. On this view, Protestantism is what is not Roman Catholic; it maintains its identity by stressing its divergence from Roman Catholicism and by emphasising the events and ideas that harden that distinctiveness.

This traditional emphasis has a number of unfortunate outcomes, and I want to focus on one of those – namely, the tendency to define ourselves in a negative and reactive manner. In other words, Protestant self-definition has often been framed negatively in terms of what it is not rather than positively, in terms of what it is. Has this, I wonder, sometimes led us to lose sight of a vision of the gospel which can redeem and transform humanity, and in its place simply to present a cultural alternative to Roman Catholicism? It is a worrying possibility.

So we face some challenges. But identifying those challenges is simply the necessary prelude to preparing to meet them. And I believe that this can be done – though it will involve giving careful thought to what Protestant Christianity is all about. Perhaps I could anchor what I want to say to a slogan that has long been associated with the Presbyterian Church in Ireland – ardens sed virens – “burning yet flourishing”, if I might offer a rough translation. It is one of a group of slogans that has long been associated with the story of the Burning Bush in the Book of Exodus, and inspired many sermons and works of literature – for example, the poem of that name by the German dramatist Bertold Brecht (1898-1956).

The motto speaks to us of regeneration and renewal, even in difficult times. I speak to you as one who believes that there is indeed a future for Protestantism in Northern Ireland. Yet this must involve refocusing our thinking about our identity, and renewing our vision.

Now to talk about change of any kind is profoundly unsettling. But as you will see, the process of refocussing and renewal of vision that I am going to propose to you tonight is not about abandoning the past, and drifting off, like a rudderless ship, into an uncertain future. Nor is it about redefining ourselves to meet a cultural shift, as a chameleon changes its colour to blend in with its background. It is about rediscovering an older vision – a vision which inspired the Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century, and which, I believe, we can recover here. Let me stress immediately that I am not proposing that we pretend that we are living in the sixteenth century, trying to turn the clock back to another era in history which is now long behind us. We cannot do that, nor should we. Rather, what I will be proposing is that we recapture the vision that fired those who brought Protestantism into being, and ask how we might apply that vision to our own situation today. And although some of what I shall be saying tonight may be specific to Presbyterianism – I wish to honour my hosts! – I think it will be clear that it has much wider application than this.

So where shall we begin? Perhaps the best place to begin is also the simplest – the reasons why the Reformation of the sixteenth century came into being in the first place. Although historians rightly point out the complex political, social and economic background against which the Reformation took place, it is clear that it was a fundamentally religious movement, with an agenda which could be summarised in two words: reform and renewal. The fundamental conviction of Martin Luther was that the church of his day was an institution without a vision.

Let me repeat that phrase: an institution without a vision. For Luther, the medieval church had become so preoccupied with issues of political power and social influence that it had lost sight of its fundamental reason for being there in the first place – namely, that it was entrusted with the gospel of grace. It needed to be reformed,

because it had developed a series of questionable practices and beliefs, all of which needed to be judged and challenged in the light of the Bible. And it needed to be renewed, because without the transforming power of the gospel of Christ, an institution simply will not survive. It becomes like those dead bones seen by the prophet Ezekiel – dead bones waiting for someone to breathe life into them. It is like a tree cut off from the living water it needs to sustain and invigorate it, unable to flourish and bear fruit. We must never allow our churches to become like that – institutions which plod on, mechanically and woodenly, from year to year, without a clear sense of why we are here, and what we have to offer.

Much of what our forebears sought to recover in the sixteenth century has a new relevance in this postmodern age. The anxiety, social fragmentation and political uncertainty of the early sixteenth century mirrors our own situation to a remarkable extent. As many of you will know, Calvin was convinced that he and his contemporaries stood on the edge of a precipice. Christianity was about to go into terminal decline. Calvin argued that there was a collapse of the social order throughout Europe. Children no longer regarded their parents with any respect. Religious knowledge had reached an all-time-low, with far too many people having only the most rudimentary notion of the gospel. Atheism was growing in importance, especially among the educated and professional classes. And Islam seemed to be on the point of conquering western Europe. Martin Luther, for example, believed it was only a matter of decades before the Turks would overwhelm all of Europe, and convert it to Islam.

Yet Protestantism survived. In fact, it did rather more than that; it overcame the immense challenges of that age, and went on to prosper. Now, we face new challenges. In what follows, I want to explore three issues which I believe can help us recover vision, confidence and faithfulness in these challenging times. I want to begin by addressing a real danger – that we develop institutions without a vision.

A reason to exist – the Gospel

Protestantism came into being partly as a protest against what it saw as versions of Christianity that were inadequate, deficient or just

plain wrong. In its place, they offered a positive and compelling vision of the Christian faith that they believed was true and authentic – and for those reasons, attractive and powerful. Part of our task is to refocus on the gospel, and ensure that social, political and institutional issues are never allowed to obscure or overshadow its wonder. So let us begin by reflecting a little on this gospel, and why it is so important.

Let me cite from a classic Reformed catechism, which sets modern evangelicalism an exciting and challenging agenda. “What”, asked the Shorter Westminster Catechism, “is the chief end of man?” The answer given is a jewel: “to glorify God and enjoy him for ever”. This brief statement sets us on a journey of theological exploration – to gain a fresh apprehension of the glory of God, so that we might return that glory to God and have our spiritual lives enriched by the knowledge of such a God. To catch such a glimpse of the full splendour of God is also a powerful stimulus to evangelism. Was it not by catching a glimpse of the glory of God in the temple that Isaiah repended to the divine call to go forth in service?

Perhaps the most moving statement of the wonder of knowing God can be seen in Paul’s letter to the Christians in the Roman colony of Philippi. After listing all his achievements, Paul comments on how they are all trivial compared with the unsurpassable richness of knowing Christ (Philippians 3:7-8): “Whatever was to my profit, I now count as loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” These words resonate with the excitement of discovery and fulfilment. Paul had found something that ended his long quest for truth and meaning.

Jesus made a similar point in one of his parables. He compared the kingdom of heaven to a pearl of great price. “The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it” (Matthew 13:45-6). The merchant finds a priceless pearl for sale, and decides that he will sell everything in order to possess it. Why? Because here is something of supreme value. Here is something which is worth possessing. Everything else he possesses seems of little value in comparison.

The merchant searching for that pearl is himself a parable of the long human search for meaning and significance. It is clear from the parable that he already possesses many small pearls. Perhaps he bought them in the hope that they would provide him with the satisfaction that he longed for. Yet he is still looking for something really special – and when that comes along, he gladly sells them all in order to take hold of it.

Many of the beliefs and values that we and our culture take hold of are like those lesser pearls. They seemed worthwhile, and for a time offered fulfilment. Yet, deep down, we knew that there had to be something better. The accumulation of possessions does not bring happiness. Neither does the acquisition of status and power. These are like drugs with the power to soothe and console for a while, before their power begins to wane. We begin to look around again, seeking something which will achieve permanently what we thought these goals promised. They turn out to be like one of Gerald Ratner's prawn sandwiches, for those of you who remember that public relations debacle of 1991.

When the merchant found that pearl of great price, he gladly abandoned all that he had accumulated. Here, at last, was something that was worth possessing! What he had obtained previously was a preparation for this final purchase. He had come to know the true value of what he possessed, and was looking for the final culmination of his search for a precious pearl. When he saw it, he knew that everything already in his possession seemed dull and lacklustre in comparison. Just as the brilliance of the sun drowns that of the stars, so that they can only be seen at night, so this great pearl allowed the merchant to see what he already owned in a different perspective. What he had thought would satisfy him proved only to disclose his dissatisfaction, and make him long for something which was, for the moment, beyond his grasp. And then he saw that special pearl. He knew he had to have it.

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges to our imaginations is to think of something which exceeds in beauty anything that we have ever experienced. Part of the challenge lies in identifying the most wonderful thing that we have ever encountered. We are then asked to imagine something that would surpass even this. And God is like

that. God is like the best thing we know and love in this world – only better.

All of us need something reliable, unshakeable and secure on which to build our lives. There is little point in building our lives on a set of values or beliefs which will go out of date in five years. The “pearl of great price”, which is supremely worth possessing, has been purchased for us through the death of Jesus. The “bread of life” which alone has the power to satisfy our longings for meaning and immortality has been made known to us – and made available as a gift which is offered to us. The salve which will heal our wounds is ready and available. God is precisely such an unshakeable and immovable foundation for our lives. As the Psalmist pointed out, God is like a rock, a fortress and a strong tower – someone in whom we find security, stability and peace. For the Psalmist, God is a consoling and caring presence and strength, even in the darkest moments of life as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4). For the writers of the New Testament, loving God and being loved by God are things of supreme value and worth, which will remain for ever. As Paul put it (Romans 8:38-9):

I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, not anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

For Paul, “to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). His personal relationship with God in Jesus was something which he treasured above everything else, and which he knew would remain with him for ever. He had found something which alone was fulfilling, which alone satisfied – and which would and could never be taken away from him. We all need something like that. And the churches can offer precisely that – something which our culture needs to hear, and which we are meant to bring to it.

So do we see our identity as being linked with this unique calling – that we are stewards of the best news the world has ever known? Traditionally, Protestant understandings of the nature of the church have been grounded on the assumption that the church is grounded in

a largely settled Christian context, and is thus primarily concerned with issues of pastoral care and teaching. But all the evidence points to the growing importance of evangelism – to helping a new generation discover the wonder of the gospel. In his book The Provocative Church, my Oxford colleague Graham Tomlin argues that we cannot simply add sharing the gospel to a list of things that the church does. It determines what the church is. We need to refocus our understanding of Protestant identity in the light of this calling and commission – that we are to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:17-20), including our own.

The New Importance of Community

A leading feature of postmodernity is the importance it attaches to a sense of community. We need to belong somewhere. We need to feel that we are accepted and wanted. The success of the American television series Cheers illustrates this point perfectly. The series, which was based on a bar in Boston, began in 1982 and ran for 271 episodes. Its immense success centred on its strong sense of community. Here was somewhere that people felt was special. It was somewhere in which everybody knew your name. Outside was a uniform crowd of indistinct, unidentified people. But inside, you were special. You mattered. You belonged. The creation of community has become an increasingly important political issue in many western nations, especially when set against the backdrop of a breakdown of social cohesion in recent decades. How can a sense of community, if once lost, be recreated?

You will all know how important the church community is to Protestant life and thought. The church is to be seen as a body, an institution within which faith may be nourished and sustained. As John Calvin stated this point:

[The church] is the bosom into which God is pleased to gather his children, not only so that they may be nourished by her assistance and ministry while they are infants and children, but also so that they may be guided by her motherly care until they mature and reach the goal of faith. . . . For those to whom God is Father, the church shall also be their mother. . . . Let us learn from this simple word ‘mother’ how useful (indeed, how

necessary) it is to know her. There is no other way to life, unless this mother conceives us in her womb, nourishes us at her breast, and keeps us under her care and guidance.

The visible institution of the church is thus treated as a fundamental resource for the life of faith. It is here that believers may encounter and support one another, and find mutual encouragement through praising God and hearing his word. The institution of the church is a necessary, helpful, God-given and God-ordained means of spiritual growth and development. It is meant to be there – and it is meant to be used. The Christian is not meant to be, nor called to be, a radical and solitary romantic, wandering in isolated loneliness through the world; rather, the Christian is called to be a member of a community.

Christian churches have long been the centres of community life in the west. The more entrepreneurial of American churches have recently begun to develop this role further, seeing the church as an oasis of communal stability in a rapidly changing culture, initially attracting those who seek community – but then enabling them to discover the ultimate basis of that community in Christ himself. Those who long to belong somewhere thus come to believe. Traditional approaches to evangelism often hold that the decision to believe precedes the decision to belong. In other words, a person comes to faith (perhaps through attending a Billy Graham rally), and then begins to attend church. Yet this is only one possibility, and we impoverish our ministries if we believe it is the only biblical model. Our postmodern longing for belonging, if we take Augustine of Hippo's doctrine of human nature seriously, is ultimately – if covertly – a longing for God.

The importance of community is obvious from some of the images that Paul uses in his letters to help us understand what Christ has done for us through his cross and resurrection. One of these images is that of adoption. Paul assures us that, through Christ, we have been adopted as the children of God (Romans 8:23; Galatians 4:5). This image, drawn from Roman family law, is seen by Paul as casting light on the privileges and place of Christians in their relationship with God. It is an image that demands to be understood in our minds, and appreciated in our hearts.

Adoption is a biblical image that we find relatively easy to understand, and which resonates deeply with our cultural mood. A family decides to grant a child who was not born within its bounds the same legal privileges as those children born within its bounds. The adopted children will thus have the same inheritance rights as the natural children. Christians may therefore think of themselves as having been brought within the family of God, and granted the same legal privileges as any natural children. And who is the natural child of God? None other than Christ himself. Paul thus makes the powerful point that all that God bestowed upon Christ as his son will eventually be granted to us, as the children of God:

We are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him (Romans 8:16-17).

The family marks of the children of God are thus suffering in this life, and the promise of glory in the life to come. Glory lies beyond suffering, and we must learn to see suffering as a privilege to be borne gladly as a consequence of our new status.

Yet the image of adoption appeals to our imaginations and hearts, not just to our minds. It cries out to be imaginatively rendered, not just understood. For adoption is about being wanted. It is about belonging. These are deeply emotive themes, which resonate with the cares and concerns of many in our increasingly fractured society. To be adopted is to be invited into a loving and caring environment. It is to be welcomed, wanted and valued. Adoption celebrates the privilege of invitation, in which the outsider is welcomed into the fold of faith and love.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most significant reflection on such issues has emerged from the United States. The August 1996 number of the Atlantic Monthly ran a major article entitled “Welcome to the Next Church”, which featured some of the more radical and innovative approaches now being adopted to Christian worship and life. A good example of these new approaches is found in the Mariners Church, close to Newport Beach, California, which merged some years ago with a neighbouring megachurch to become “Mariners Southcoast Church”. The success of this church, and

countless others like it, can be related to their recognition of the importance of creating a sense of community identity. People want to belong, not just believe. Such churches see themselves as “islands in the stream”, like the monasteries of the Middle Ages, offering safety and community to travellers on the journey of life. Identity is about belonging somewhere. And the community churches see themselves as providing a community for its members.

A community church is like smalltown America of bygone days, with a population numbered in the low thousands. There is a sense of belonging to a common group, of shared common values, and of knowing each other. People don't just go to community churches; they see themselves as belonging there. As Atlantic Monthly journalist Charles Trueheart discovered, “belonging to Mariners or any other large church conveys membership in a community, with its benefits of friends and solace and purpose, and the deep satisfaction of service to others.” At a time when American society appears to be fragmenting, the community churches offer cohesion.

Thus Mariners offers its members a whole range of social activities, all designed to meet needs, offer service and forge community. On the morning that Trueheart visited the church, he discovered seminars on single parenting, recovery meetings from alcohol and drugs abuse, women's Bible studies, a session on divorce dynamics, and a mens' retreat – to mention just a few. As Trueheart notes, these churches “are proving themselves to be breeding grounds for personal renewal and human interconnectedness”.

It is important to make this connection with the changing face of America. In a much-cited article published in the November 1994 number of the same Atlantic Monthly, management guru Peter Drucker made the following point concerning the “Age of Social Transformation”:

The old communities – family, village, parish, and so on – have all but disappeared in the knowledge society. Their place has largely been taken by the new unit of social integration, the organization. Where community was fate, organization is voluntary membership.

In the old days, community was defined by where you lived. It was part of the inherited order of things, something that you were born into. Now, it has to be created – and the agency that creates this community is increasingly the voluntary organization. Christian churches are strategically placed to create and foster community, where more negative social forces are destroying it in American society as a whole. The community churches have proved especially effective in this role, and have grown immensely in consequence. The ability of faith to create communities is immense, and must never be underestimated.

Why is this so important to our thinking about Protestant Christianity in a postmodern culture here in Northern Ireland? Because it reminds us that our churches and congregations are communities – communities that must welcome people in. A recent survey in England showed that most people come to faith simply by coming to church, often being brought by family or friends, and gradually absorbing the ideas and values of the Christian community. The Alpha course, one of the most successful evangelistic tools available to today's Christian churches, brings people together to form a community of learning, as they explore the Christian faith together in a supportive journey of exploration and discovery. The church must a place where people who are lost can feel welcomed, and move on to find themselves through finding Christ.

Perhaps we can recover this vision of the church, which is firmly embedded in the New Testament. For Paul, the church was like an outpost or colony of heaven. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul declares that “our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3:20). Paul's imagery is immensely evocative, and would have been readily understood and appreciated by his readers in Philippi. Why? Because at the time of Paul's letter, Philippi was a Roman colony. Its strategic location in Macedonia made in an important military centre, and large numbers of Roman soldiers passed through the city. In addition, there was a large Roman civilian population. Philippi was proud of its ties with Rome, including its language (Latin seems to have been more widely spoken than Greek) and laws. Roman institutions served as the model in many areas of its communal life.

Paul uses the image of the church as a “colony of heaven” to bring out several leading aspects of Christian existence. By speaking of the Christian community in this way, he naturally encourages his readers to think of Christian church as an outpost of heaven in a foreign land. It speaks the language of that homeland, and is governed by its laws – despite the fact that the world around it speaks a different language, and obeys a different set of laws. Its institutions are based on those of its homeland. And, one day, its citizens will return to that homeland, to take up all the privileges and rights which that citizenship confers. The Christian’s citizenship is in heaven, and it is to this homeland that we will one day return.

This image thus lends dignity and new depths of meaning to the Christian life, especially the tension between the “now” and “not yet”, and being outsiders in a culture – in the world and yet not of the world. The Romans at Philippi could be said to be “in” Macedonia and yet not “of” Macedonia, in that they knew that they were Romans who would one day go back to their homeland. They may have lived in Philippi; their hearts were firmly attached to Rome.

We can therefore think of ourselves as exiles in this world. As Paul reminded the Christians at Philippi, our citizenship is in heaven – and we eagerly await the Saviour who will bring us home, so that we may rejoice to be where we belong. Our journey will lead us to our homeland, when we shall finally have rest. And most importantly: the church is a community, in which we anticipate the worship of heaven, and support each other as we journey to the New Jerusalem.

Now this offers us a powerful energization of our mission as Protestant churches. To be places where people are drawn by the love of God, and are supported and encouraged as they grow and discover faith. One of the church’s best theologians, Augustine of Hippo, liked to compare the church to a hospital – a place where sick people came, in order to be made whole. Is this a model for us, as we think of our role? A place which can offer a sense of belonging, a sense of place, a sense of being welcomed – and where they come to know and grow through the transforming love of God in Christ? Your congregation is a “colony of heaven” right here in Northern Ireland. It is a family – a word that we often use hurriedly and lightly, forgetting how powerful a concept it expresses. To be a

member of a family is to belong. Think about those two images – the colony and the family – and ask yourself how it might transform your thinking about the identity and mission of your congregation.

Your church can be the nucleus of God's kingdom where you are.

You can plant seeds that will make a difference to people's lives.

Your congregation can be like a Trojan Horse – the place from which what Augustine called “the secular city” can be transformed.

So think strategically!

But some of you will rightly say: “this is too great a challenge. What difference can I make? How can my congregation make any impact on our culture as a whole?” And these are fair concerns – concerns that I will address in my final point.

A reason to hope – God

Protestantism needs to recover its confidence. Not in the church or denomination as an institution, nor in our leaders. For the Reformation, one of the great failings of Christianity during the Middle Ages was to allow devotion to an institution to displace devotion to Jesus Christ, and to commitment to his gospel. For Luther, the church existed wherever the gospel was preached and proclaimed. It did not require buildings or personnel, however useful these might be. We are often told that the church today must concern itself with “mission not maintenance”, and there is much truth in that slogan. If we cannot reach out beyond our present limits, we shall slowly die. But if we fail to do that, the failing lies in us, not in what has been entrusted to us.

In this final section of my address, I want to ask you to trust God for the future. We have our part to play, and we must do all that we can to ensure that we are faithfully yet effectively relating the gospel to our culture and our people. But we need to remind ourselves that this is no human message that we are dealing with. In the end, it is God's, and we must learn to trust him as we plan for the future. And God takes individuals, and makes a difference through using them.

It is now who or what we are that really matters; it is what we allow God to do in and through us.

"I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). Having commissioned his disciples to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth, Christ adds his personal promise to this most powerful of charges. He will be with us to the end of time. He will be there for us, no matter what that uncertain future may hold. Abraham left everything and set off from his home town to the distant and unknown land of Canaan. He knew that the Lord who had called him would be with him as he journeyed, and that this most gracious and caring God had a purpose in mind in calling him to do this (Genesis 12:1-5).

So it is with us. Christ has called us to leave the cares of the world behind, and seek the hidden riches of the kingdom of God. Yet perhaps the greatest of all those riches is the promise of his glorious presence, to illuminate our lives and warm our cold hearts. He is there always, whether we know that in our experience or not. And in contemplating Christ, we find our heart's desire. This point was made powerfully by Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-92): "There is, in contemplating Christ, a balm for every wound." Spurgeon here rightly located the source of all spiritual nourishment, comfort and stimulus in the contemplation of Christ. Indeed, Spurgeon's preaching ministry may be said to represent an extended exploration of exactly such a contemplation of Christ.

Yet we live in changing and challenging times. Sometimes it seems to us that we are in the midst of a cultural and political storm, and it is not clear what way we should turn. We are all familiar with the gospel story of the disciples being terrified by a strong wind which engulfed them as they crossed the Sea of Galilee on their way to Capernaum (John 6:16-21). They seemed to be at the mercy of the elements, and were deeply afraid. Then, at the height of the storm, Jesus appears and speaks these words to them: "It is I. Do not be afraid."

The words spoken by Jesus are both consoling and challenging. Yet the traditional translation of those words is not quite accurate, or adequate to convey the full import of Christ's meaning. A better

translation would read like this: “I am. Do not be afraid”. The very presence of Christ is itself enough to calm our storms and assuage our fears. Christ is here. This is a promise nestling within a statement. We should not be afraid, for Christ is with us. This incident illustrates the importance of Christ as a consoling presence. Others stress his importance as a solid foundation, a rock upon which we may build and in which we may trust in times of difficulty, danger or uncertainty.

We must indeed face the uncertainties of the future head on, and not try to evade them, either by ignoring them or hoping that they will go away. The ostrich has never been a particularly good role model for church leaders, although I suspect some are at times tempted to follow its example, and bury their heads in the sand. The history of Christianity has been about the church facing up to challenges, developing ways of dealing with them, and passing those ways on to following generations. We have benefitted from both the wisdom and resources of the past; others have faced the difficulties of their age, and passed on to us what they found helpful and useful. We must now do the same.

There is both a challenge and an opportunity here. The challenge is, I think, obvious. But there is also a real opportunity here. The opportunity is to forge a vision for the future which is rooted in the past, grounded in the gospel, and looking to the future. We cannot use hand-me-downs from the past, applying to our own situation what worked for Calvin in sixteenth-century Geneva, or for Jonathan Edwards in eighteenth-century New England. Our task is to take the gospel, and apply it to our own situation right now – a situation which none know better than you. We can be guided, informed and encouraged by the wisdom of the past – but our situation is no longer theirs, and we must follow their example by interacting with what is living and present. That is what Christian stewardship is all about.

As we contemplate the future, we must remind ourselves that we have not been entrusted with some words of human wisdom, which will be out of date in next to no time. We believe that we have been entrusted with something that rests on the wisdom of God. Here is something that transcends anything that human wisdom can dream

up. As Paul reminded the Christians in Corinth, the gospel rested on the power and wisdom of God. And that means that we must see our situation in its true perspective. We are not like the marketer of some shampoo, which people are no longer buying, who has to dream up new ways of making a tired product attractive – or even replacing it altogether with something new. Our task is rather to make sure that the full power and wonder of the “pearl of great price” is displayed, proclaimed and appreciated. We do not need to make it relevant, for it is so already. Our task is to ensure that we faithfully yet effectively proclaim its power in terms that our culture can understand. The Reformation, remember, insisted on preaching in the vernacular – in a “language understood by the people”. We must make sure that we proclaim the gospel using imagery and language that relates to and can be understood within our culture – or, better, to the complex networks of “cultures” that now extends across the Province.

Postmodernity poses many challenges. But there is a new interest in spirituality, which we must ensure is addressed, and allowed to lead to a new interest in Christianity and the churches. In the past, we were often very good at addressing the mind, proclaiming Christianity in terms that could be understood. Yet writers such as our favourite Ulsterman, C. S. Lewis, remind us that we must never limit the gospel to human reason, but must ensure it connects up with the world of the imagination and emotions. We must ensure that the gospel is connected up with every aspect of our lives. The new interest in Harry Potter and the Lord of the Rings is a telling indicator of the appeal of the human imagination, and we must make sure that the power of the gospel to connect up with that imagination is appreciated and addressed. The problem is that we too often limit the gospel, placing its light under a bushel of our own making.

My point is that we must never leave God out of this discussion. The gospel is God’s gift to us, not a human invention. We proclaim it in and through the power of the Holy Spirit, not in our own strength or wisdom. Sometimes the old wineskins just cannot contain the new wine, and we may need to rethink some of our traditional ways of being church. New ideas are pouring in from Asia and North America – the cell church, the community church,

the seeker-sensitive church, and the purpose-driven church, just to give you some examples. Maybe they won't work here. Maybe they're not as good as some think. But my point is that behind each of these ideas there are people who have thought and prayed about things, and taken risks for the sake of the kingdom. Faithfulness isn't about the uncritical repetition of the past; it's about due respect for the past, certainly, but above all it is about stepping out in faith to trailblaze. And I'm sure that there are some trailblazers here tonight – entrepreneurs who have caught a vision of what they believe God wants them to do, and believe that this might well make a big difference. They must be encouraged.

But we must all draw encouragement from the fact that we are not on our own here. We are like the people of Israel, wandering in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land, trusting that God would lead them safely into the future. We are dealing with a God who may be trusted. Let me remind you of an incident at that time. You will recall that, after the death of Moses, Joshua was asked to lead Israel into Canaan. Imagine how he must have felt! The old leadership was gone. He was on his own. He must have felt the weight of responsibility. Perhaps we feel the same way. The leadership of Protestantism has passed into new hands. The old cultural certainties seem rather less secure today. But let Joshua be an example to us. For he heard God speak these words to him – and I suggest they are words that are also spoken to us tonight.

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1.9).

That same God – that same presence, power and promise – is with us as we seek and struggle to serve him today. The tasks and responsibilities are great; but greater still is God's goodness, loving-kindness and faithfulness, on which we may draw at all times.

Conclusion

But I have spoken for long enough. In this lecture, I have tried to offer encouragement, both to trust in God and to renew your vision of the gospel and the mission of the church. I have only had time to

scratch the surface of some vast topics, and have had to leave out many things.

The question I asked, right at the beginning, was this: What place does the future hold for Protestant Christianity in Northern Ireland? If we are foolish about this, and think that nineteenth-century ways of being Protestant will serve us well in the twenty-first century, the answer might not be very encouraging. But the Reformation bequeathed to us a dynamic vision of the Christian faith, which encourages us always to reexamine things, and step out in faith as we try to serve the Lord. The gospel offers us a vision – a vision which drives our personal ministries and our institutions. It is a vision which must always be renewed. My plea is that, as we the 150th anniversary of Union College, we do all that we humanly can to ensure that another celebration of this kind will happen in 2153 – while trusting in God to guide and resource us in the meantime.

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JEWS IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

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The use made of Old Testament imagery in the Book of Revelation has received much attention, but little study has been devoted to the direct reference to Jews in 2.9 and 3.9. This article finds clues to John's invective in literary sources and archaeological inscriptions. We see Judaism not as monolithic but as heterogeneous and influenced by extraneous cultural influences. John believed the Jews with whom he had contact to be in danger of losing their distinctive character. This accords with the widely-held view that John's message to the churches arises from his fear of their accommodation to the prevailing culture.

Introduction

The influence of Judaism on the Book of Revelation has long been recognised and work done on the images and symbols drawn from Judaism has done much to open up the meaning of the book. However, the direct reference to Jews in 2.9 and 3.9 has received rather less attention.

To the church at Smyrna, 'I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan (2.9).

To the church at Philadelphia, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but are lying - I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you (3.9).

These twin texts have been taken as evidence of an implacable conflict between Christians and Jews. It is linked with the view of

Jews in the fourth gospel and in the case of Revelation is widely believed to have been exacerbated by Jews informing on Christians to the Roman authorities. This article will attempt to show that the attack on the Jews in Rev.2.9 and 3.9 reflects a danger faced by both Judaism and Christianity in Asia Minor at the time of writing.

The Literary Context

The genre of the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3 is composite, but its prophetic character predominates. This is clear from the use of the formula "thus says" (*tade legei*) (2.1, 8, etc), which is equivalent to the Old Testament formula used for prophetic proclamations. But this formula has been shown by Aune to have also been used in royal and imperial edicts issued by Persian kings and Roman magistrates and emperors.¹

The first part of the edict is the *praescriptio* or introduction, which states the authority behind the edict. The *narratio* of the edict contains information. Next is the *dispositio* or exhortation/ threat. Finally, we have the *sanctio*, the conditional promise of victory. This structure can be seen in each of the seven letters (cf., e.g. 2.18, 19-21, 22-25, 26-28). Such an interpretation of the letters resonates with the message of Revelation as a whole: John's aim is to assert the sovereignty of God and polarise God and the emperor. Thus the letters introduce Jesus as the all-powerful Lord "from whose mouth comes a sharp, two-edged sword" (1.16). He is presented as the one who solemnly and authoritatively issues edicts.²

A further interesting observation is made by Friedrich. He says that John in casting his message in the form of an edict was in fact employing a custom used in contemporary literature by persons who did not execute power but were making a bid to do so.³ Friedrich

¹ D. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, Dallas: Word Books, 1997, 124-9.

² Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 129.

³ N.P. Friedrich, *Adapt or Resist? A Socio-Political Reading of Revelation 2.18-29*, JSNT 25 (2002), 187-8.

draws on Margareta Benner who shows that in the years between the fall of Nero and the rise of Vespasian these promulgations were an important means of contestation.⁴ She says:

They (the edicts) were issued by persons of important political standing: emperors, governors, etc., and were sent and posted up all over the empire, declaring the political standpoint of the personage who issued them, informing the inhabitants, influencing public opinion, and recruiting followers.⁵

Hence John in declaring that it is “the Son of God” who addresses the church at Thyatira (2.18) may well be attacking the claims made by the emperor. Roman emperors characteristically claimed that they were “sons of god.”⁶ Right at the outset of his work John engages in polemic against the fraudulent claims being made by Caesar, asserting that the one who speaks and exercises power is not the emperor but the one who rules the kings of the earth.

The Imperial Rule Challenged

The attack on the imperial ruler launched by John in the letters introduces us immediately to the main part of the book (4-22). The opening vision of God enthroned in glory and worshipped by all is a subtle condemnation of the rule of the emperor (4.1-11). The idolatry and oppression that was part and parcel of Roman rule is exposed and condemned in the succeeding visions. Those in authority are deceived by the peace and prosperity they enjoy (12.9; 13.14; 19.20; 20.3). Intertwined with John’s criticism of Rome’s idolatry and oppression is his exposé of the economic order. All

⁴ M. Benner, *The Emperor Says: Studies in Rhetorical Style in Edicts of the Early Empire*, Gothenburg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1975.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 141, quoted by Friedrich, 188.

⁶ C.J.Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in their Local Setting*, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986, 116; Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 201-2; Friedrich, 187-8.

who buy and sell bear the stamp of the Beast (13.16-17). As Knight writes,

This explains the extended description of the goods that can no longer be sold when Babylon falls (18.11-13). This catastrophe causes the merchants (18.15) and the shipmasters and seafarers (18.17) to regret the city's demise. The description of the fall of Babylon is a symbolic rejection of Rome's attraction for those who benefited from supplying her with goods. That probably included some of John's Asian readers, so that the criticism has a cutting edge for those who perceive its meaning.⁷

The letters to the seven churches show John attacking idolatry not only in the state but also in the church. A church leader whom he denigrates as Jezebel is severely criticized. Jezebel is guilty of "teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols" (2.20). This charge is virtually identical to the false teaching of the Balaam party and the Nicolaitans in Pergamum (2.14-15), which means that all three very likely were harming the churches with the same teaching. The substance of their teaching can be inferred from the use of the term Jezebel since Jezebel in 1 Kings incited king Ahab and Israel to compromise and "fornicate" by worshipping Baal (16.31; 21.25; LXX 4 Kgdms 8.18; 9.22). Jezebel apparently led a group which defended participation in idolatrous aspects of the local culture, i.e. it advocated a more accommodating attitude toward mainstream culture. Moreover, since Thyatira was the centre of numerous prosperous trade guilds we can safely infer that Christian guild members would be expected to honour the emperor.⁸ This also explains John's reference to the eating of food offered to idols. What John faced was the distressing fact that idolatry pervaded not only the political and economic life of the empire but the church itself.

⁷ J.Knight, *Revelation*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999, 26.

⁸ Cf. e.g. Beale, 261; J.N.Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John's Apocalypse*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996, 110-13, 117.

For John compromise between God and Caesar and church and world was right out of question. It is in this context, I suggest, we should understand John's attack on the Jews in 2.9 and 3.9.

In responding to the theological challenge confronting him John set out to make clear the true nature of Christian faith and discipleship and to reinforce the boundaries which marked the church off from the world.

Those Who Say They Are Jews And Are Not

Support for the view that those whom John regarded as false Jews were Jews who informed on Christians to the Roman magistrate has been found by commentators in the part played by Jews in the death of Polycarp as reported in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. In this document Jews denounce Polycarp publicly (12.2-3), demand his execution (13.1) and attempt to prevent his friends from retrieving his body (17.2; 18.1). But this writing is regarded as an historically tendentious attempt to copy the gospel story of the death of Jesus. Much the same is said about the strong anti-Jewish sentiment in Justin Martyr, Eusebius and other early Christian writers, if not the New Testament gospels themselves. The emphasis on Jewish opposition to Christians in literature of the period is believed to be in part a theological convention in Christian apologetics that required little if any hard evidence.⁹

A related view takes John's words as his reaction to Christians being excluded from the synagogue. This is connected with the *birkath ha' minim*, the so-called Test Benediction which was added to the *Prayer of XVIII Benedictions*, recited daily in the synagogue. It ran, "Let Christians and *minim* (heretics) perish in a moment. Let them be blotted out of the book of the living and let them not be written with the righteous". This cannot be regarded as a

⁹ D.R.A. Hare, *The Theme of Jewish Persecution of Christians in the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, SNTSMS 6 CUP, 1967; Aune, *Revelation* 1-5, 162-3.

satisfactory view because conflict with Judaism is not present in Revelation generally.

An alternative interpretation is offered by Kraft. He believes that those whom John had in mind were Christians who deserted the churches and sought refuge in the synagogue in order to avoid persecution.¹⁰ This is possible, but there is no evidence in Revelation to support it.

A variant of this is the suggestion of Knight that the "false Jews" are Christians who engage in practices such as social relations with the outside community which John condemns.¹¹ In this case, those in mind are similar to Jezebel and the others attacked. John does speak of "false apostles" (2.2), but to describe Christians as those who claim to be Jews seems very unlikely.

A not dissimilar interpretation is that which sees "those who say they are Jews and are not" as Judaizing Christians. Support for this is found in the letters of Ignatius, which indicate that Judaizers were a still a problem after John wrote (*Mag.8.10; Phil.6.1; 8.2*). However, there is no indication that this kind of opposition was experienced by John's churches (2.10,13; 3.10).

A quite different view is taken by Marshall.¹² He maintains that Revelation is a Jewish work, "a parable on the historical situation of Asian Jews during the Judean war."¹³ Marshall argues that John's aim was to support the hard-pressed Jews of Palestine by drumming up support among the Jews of Asia Minor. In some ways, Marshall's arguments resemble Christian interpretations of the

¹⁰ H. Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, HNT 16a, Tübingen: J.C.B.Mohr, 1974, 61.

¹¹ Knight, *op.cit.*, 45,54.

¹² J.W.Marshall, *Parables of War: Reading John's Jewish Apocalypse*, Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2001.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 141.

book. Rome is the enemy. The Lamb is the messianic leader of the faithful. The faithful are charged to keep the "commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus" (12.17). The problem, according to Marshall, is a fifth column within the synagogue - those Jews who are guilty of accommodation with Rome and indulge in syncretistic practices. John writes "to move them to resist the temptations of the Greco-Roman complex" and to "trust God through his lamb."¹⁴ Although Marshall's thesis is a *tour de force*, his view that "those who say they are Jews and are not" are Jews who have made accommodations with pagan society suggests an interesting line of enquiry.

A similar view was suggested by Tarn as early as 1927. He opined that the offence which those whom John refers to as Jews was their syncretistic tendencies.¹⁵ This view is tentatively entertained by Ford.¹⁶ Commenting on the "synagogue of Satan", Ford says, "this is especially possible as the altar of Zeus at Pergamum is referred to... as "Satan's seat."¹⁷ Since syncretistic practices are widely believed by scholars to be the basic problem represented by the Nicolaitans and the others condemned in Revelation 2 this interpretation deserves attention.

It is time to look at what we may learn from the sources about the Jews of Asia Minor at the beginning of the Christian era.

Jews And Asia Minor Culture

The evidence from literary sources and from archaeological inscriptions provides valuable information on Jewish communities

¹⁴ Marshall, *op.cit.*, 182.

¹⁵ W.W.Tarn and G.T. Griffith, *Hellenistic Civilization*, 3rd Edition, London: Edward Arnold, 1927, 225. See also W.O. E. Oesterley, *A History of Israel*, Vol. 2, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932, 424).

¹⁶ J.M. Ford, *Revelation*, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1975, 393.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 393.

at the beginning of the period in question. Josephus has preserved a letter from Antiochus III to his viceroy Zeuxis, governor of Lydia, giving instructions concerning two thousand Jewish families who had been moved from Mesopotamia to Phrygia (*Ant.* 12.148-53). He speaks of large and influential Jewish communities (14.259-61; 16.171,235). From Philo we learn that "the Jews were numerous in every city of Asia" (*Leg.*245). Inscriptions also testify to active Jewish communities in many places.¹⁸ This is borne out by the Book of Acts (13.14; 14.1; 16.13; 18.19,26; 19.8).

The synagogue at Sardis is a good illustration of the size, wealth and influence of some Asia Minor communities.¹⁹ Other Jewish communities were obviously prosperous. The Jews of Pergamum had twenty pounds of gold for Jerusalem taken from them by the predatory Roman governor (Cicero, *Pro Flacco* 28.66-69). Similarly, the Jews of Cos had a large sum of money confiscated by Mithridates of Pontus (*Ant.* 14.111-13).²⁰

Recent studies of Asia Minor Judaism by Trebilco and Barclay have emphasized the extent to which Jews were integrated into the life of their cities. They served in commercial, social, municipal and imperial offices and would have been familiar with the all-

¹⁸ *Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum*, vol 1, 1936, ed. J.B.Frey, 738, 741,748, 756, 766, 774.

¹⁹ A.T.Kraabel, "The Impact of the Discovery of the Sardis Synagogue," *Sardis from Prehistoric to Roman Times*, ed. G.M.A. Hanfmann, Cambridge: Harvard, 1983; P.R.Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor*, Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1991, 37-54.

²⁰ On Jews generally in Asia Minor see Cicero, *pro Flacco* 28.66-69; Rev.3.15-22; D. Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor to the End of the Third Century After Christ*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950, 469 - 74; S. Applebaum, "The Social and Economic Status of the Jews in the Diaspora," *The Jewish People in the First Century* *Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum* I, ed. S.Safrai and M.Stern, Assen/Amsterdam: van Gorcum, 1976, 701-27; Hemer, *Op.cit.*,182-3; G.K.Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, Grand Rapids and Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans and Paternoster Press, 1999, 287.

pervasiveness of pagan cults.²¹ The cults undoubtedly affected Jews who found themselves increasingly integrated into social and political life.²² In his study of the different levels or degrees of the assimilation of Jews into pagan society Barclay lists participation in non-Jewish cults as the chief influence.²³ Trebilco believes that while some communities were discerning and careful in regard to pagan society and its institutions others were not and adopted a relaxed attitude. The Mishnah tractate *Abodah Zarah* forbade Jews from doing business with Gentiles for three days before a pagan festival (1.1), but, as Trebilco points out, it is clear that this ruling was not known or not observed in Jewish communities of Asia Minor²⁴

Just how relaxed some Jews were in regard to non-Jewish culture is clear from the important synagogue in Acmonia. An inscription refers to a woman, Julia Severa, who built the synagogue during the reign of Nero.²⁵ Although Ramsay believed the lady in question was a Jewess²⁶ and Barclay has reopened the question of her identity,²⁷ it seems clear that she was a priestess of the imperial cult. Her first husband, Servenius Capito, belonged to a Roman family of much distinction. It is remarkable that the fact that she

²¹ P.R.Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 173-85; J.M.G.Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1996, 259-81.

²² See e.g. A.T. Kraabel, "Paganism and Judiasm - the Sardis Evidence", *Paganisme, Judaïsme, Christianisme*, A.Benoit, M.Philonenko, C. Vogel, ed., Paris: Boccard, 1978, 13-33.

²³ Ibid. 320-26.

²⁴ Ibid. 31, 180-1.

²⁵ Trebilco, 58-84.

²⁶ A.M.Ramsay, *Cities and Bishoprics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897, 639, 650-1, 673.

²⁷ Barclay, 280 n 5.

functioned as high priestess (ἀρχιέρα) of the imperial cult at Acmonia and was president of the athletic games²⁸ did not stop the Jews of Acmonia from accepting her gift or recording it for posterity.²⁹ It is evidence that diaspora Judaism was much more diverse than was generally recognised.

It is germane to this stage of our enquiry to note that syncretism was a feature of worship generally in Asia Minor. The imperial cult was often influenced by local cults. Price and Friesen give numerous examples of sacrifices that were offered to both the emperor and the Greek deity.³⁰ In some instances the imperial cult activities were simply incorporated into an existing temple. Thus at Pergamum worship was offered both to Julia (Livilla) sister of emperor Claudius and to Athena. In another inscription from Pergamum we find the *sebastoi* (probably Augustus and Livia) are assimilated into the worship of the local deity Asklepios. At Ephesus the imperial cult was conjoined to the worship of Demeter.³¹ In the friezes of the temple complex of Aphrodisias victorious Roman emperors are portrayed as Olympian gods and Aphrodite and Asklepios fit into the imperial cult with no sense of incongruity. It is Friesen's opinion that "the practice of joint worship - incorporating imperial worship and the cult of another deity - was widespread".³² He believes that municipal cults tended to focus on local deities more than upon the emperor.³³

²⁸ Trebilco, 58-60.

²⁹ Trebilco, 60.

³⁰ S.R.F. Price, *Rituals and Power. The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor*, Cambridge University Press, 1984; S.J.Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John*, Oxford University Press, 2001, 77-95.

³¹ Friesen, 62-63.

³² *Op.cit.*, 75.

³³ *Op.cit.*, 77-103.

Thus the Beast of the earth of Rev. 13. 11 -12, which is widely regarded by commentators as referring to the local magistrate or some other representative of the emperor, may very well have been the local priest of a Greek shrine. "For the most part, the emperor in the imperial cult was subordinated to the gods, so that the imperial cult could be assimilated to the cult of the gods".³⁴ Price has shown that the difficulties experienced by early Christians "lay firstly with their threat to traditional cults in general and only secondarily with an allegedly subversive attitude to the emperor."³⁵ Price cites only four instances where Christians were asked to sacrifice to the emperor. The challenge they faced came firstly from traditional cults.³⁶

Evidence From Magical Texts

That non-rabbinic Judaism was not monochrome in character but often multifarious is still clearer when we consider the evidence of the so-called magical texts. As these texts become more familiar they are casting useful light on Judaism and Christianity.³⁷

Trebilco describes the inscriptions from Acmonia which record curses used to protect tombs against violation. These cite for their authority the curses in the book of Deuteronomy (27.15-28.68). They are evidence of the widespread violation of tombs in Phrygia and elsewhere in Asia Minor. Kraabel believed that in some of the

³⁴ L.L.Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, 164.

³⁵ *Op. cit.*, 125.

³⁶ *Op. cit.*, 125; Thompson, 164.

³⁷ On the significance of the Greek magical papyri see H.D.Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986. On the Jewish magical texts see below.

inscriptions the Old Testament is used as a magic book,³⁸ but Trebilco rejects this possibility, while acknowledging that “there was considerable Jewish involvement in magic in this period.”³⁹

The book of Tobit has a remarkably detailed story of Jewish magic. It tells how Tobit on the advice of the angel Raphael expelled the demon that spoiled his wedding night. It is a story that, in the opinion of Alexander, “must surely reflect actually, contemporary, magical practice”.⁴⁰

In the New Testament the Book of Acts has several references to Jewish magicians (8.9-24; 13.6-11) and what it says about magical practices at Ephesus (19.19) indicates the city’s renown as a centre of magic arts. This is reflected in the use of the term “Ephesian writings” (ἑφεσίωνα γράμματα) for such magical scrolls (Anaxilas, quoted by Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* xii, 548c; Plutarch, *Convivial Questions*, 706e; Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* v. 8.45.2) and in the magical apparatus discovered at Ephesus.⁴¹ The Book of Revelation is believed to make use of magical motifs.⁴² In particular, the woman clothed with the sun and who wears a crown of twelve stars (12.1) has been taken by a number of scholars to be a

³⁸ A.T. Kraabel, *Judaism in Western Asia Minor under the Roman Empire with a Preliminary Study of the Jewish Community at Sardis*, D.Th. Thesis, Harvard University, Mass., 1968, 82.

³⁹ *Op. Cit.*, 66-9 and n 32.

⁴⁰ P. Alexander, “Incantations and Books of Magic, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, E Schürer, revised and edited by G.Vermes, F.Miller and M.Goodman, Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, III.1, 1986, 342.

⁴¹ A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1927, 263-4; R. Wünsch, ed., *Antikes Zaubergefäß aus Pergamon*, Jahrbuch des Kaiserlich Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, 6th Ergänzungsheft, Berlin, 1905, 35-36.

⁴² D.E.Aune, “The Apocalypse of John and Graeco-Roman Revelatory Magic,” *NTS*, 33 (1987), 481-501; Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 57.

reference to the zodiac.⁴³ Similarly, the twelve-fold heavenly city has been seen to allude to the zodiac.⁴⁴ But the strongly Jewish character of the context and John's frequent use of the number twelve for the people of God makes this somewhat uncertain.⁴⁵

Best known of the magical texts is the *Testament of Solomon*. This writing describes how Solomon, using a magic ring given to him by the archangel Michael, summoned various demons and compelled them to help him in the building of the temple. The tract is strongly astrological in structure and content. Both men and demons "reside" in a star (a sign of the zodiac) and, as McCown says, "mortals seem to be particularly liable to injury from demons who are s??ast??? with them, that is, belong to the same star."⁴⁶

What is considered the most important early Jewish work of astrology is the treatise known as *Sefer ha-Razim* or "The Book of Secrets." Of particular interest is the prayer to Helios. This remarkable part of the text has surprised and fascinated scholars. It is a Greek prayer, translated into Hebrew. It reads:

Holy Helios who rises in the east, good mariner,

⁴³ R.H.Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, I, Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1920, 316; G.B.Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, London: A&C Black, 1966, 149; D. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 681.

⁴⁴ A.M.Farrer, *A Rebirth of Images*, London: Dacre Press, 1949, 216-44; cf. *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964, 68; Beale, *op. cit.*, 626-7.

⁴⁵ Knight, *op cit.*, 91.

⁴⁶ C. C. McCown, *The Testament of Solomon*, Leipzig: J.C. Hinrich, 1922, 46. Cf. Alexander, "Incantations and Books of Magic," 37. On the astrological and magical traditions that grew around the figure of Solomon see P.A. Torijano, *Solomon the Esoteric King: From King to Magus, the Development of a Tradition*, Leiden, etc.: Brill, 2002. This book is a good illustration of the highly syncretistic character of magical material. Jewish, Hellenistic and Egyptian traditions are all interwoven.

trustworthy leader of the sun's rays, reliable (witness),
who of old didst establish the mighty wheel (of the
heavens),
holy orderer, ruler of the axis (of the heaven), Lord,
Brilliant Leader,
King, Soldier. I, N son of N, present my supplication
before you,
that you will appear to me without (causing me) fear,
and you will be revealed to me without causing me terror,
and you will conceal nothing from me
and will tell me truthfully all that I desire (4.61-63).⁴⁷

Morgan writes "we can sense the tensions between a developing orthodoxy and the popular religion here. *Sefer ha-Razim* is a fine example of the syncretistic nature of the Hellenistic world."⁴⁸ In similar vein, Alexander says that this text "contains many surprises which raise acutely the question of its orthodoxy... Doubtless, some early rabbinic authorities would have condemned the subject-matter of ShR as *minut*, that there is good evidence to suggest that such material circulated at the very heart of rabbinic society."⁴⁹

Further evidence of the syncretistic tendencies within Judaism is its interest in astrology. The Sibylline Oracles denounce astrology (3.18-36), but I Enoch, while referring to astrology as godlessness (8.3), uses zodiacal ideas. It calls the twelve signs of the zodiac "portals" in which the sun and moon rise and set (72.1-27) and says that the sun in his chariot is driven by the wind (72.4-5), an obvious reference to Helios. II Enoch has the sun moving according to each of the twelve animals of the zodiac (30.3). The *Treatise of Shem* in fact encourages astrology. Charlesworth believes that this largely unknown text was composed in Aramaic in Alexandria towards the

⁴⁷ Michael A. Morgan, *Sefer Ha-Razim: The Book of Mysteries*, Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983, 71.

⁴⁸ *Op cit.*, 11.

⁴⁹ Alexander, "Incantations and Books of Magic", 349.

end of the first century BC. It has twelve chapters, one for each of the signs of the zodiac. It gives predictions regarding crops, political events, personal health and the climate based on the particular sign of the zodiac in question. The text exhibits a strong astrological fatalism.⁵⁰

In Palestinian Judaism the presence of astrology and magical practices in the Qumran texts is a particularly good illustration in the way in which Judaism was penetrated by outside influences.⁵¹ The zodiac was used in their calendars and priestly rosters (4Q Astronomical Enoch (4Q 209) Frag.23; 4Q 210, frag 1). The Essenes, Josephus tells us, "undertake to foretell things to come by reading holy books ... and it is seldom that they miss in their predictions" (*Wars* 2.159). Although the Jews of Qumran were familiar with the Biblical prohibitions against magic (11 Q 419; lx. 16-21; cf. Deut. 18.9-14) their writings prove that, in Alexander's words, "they believed in and practised certain types of magic."⁵² Josephus again bears witness to the use of magic by the Essenes (*Wars* 2.136).⁵³

The texts that mention the horoscope have created particular interest. They are small fragments and their full significance is still debated. These texts use astrology to determine the character of a person from the colour of his eyes, the shape of his body and so forth. This text is written in code from left to right and uses

⁵⁰ J.H.Charlesworth, "Jewish Astrology in the Talmud, Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls and Early Palestinian Synagogues," *HTR* 70 (1977), 190-1.

⁵¹ F.G.Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated*, Brill: Leiden, 1994, 441.

⁵² P. Alexander, "Magic and Magical Texts", *Encyclopaedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. L.H. Schiffman & J.C.van der Kan, vol. 1, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 502.

⁵³ On the Essenes and magical practices see M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, London: SCM, 1974, 240-44.

irregularly letters of the archaic alphabet mixed with Greek characters. The use of code puzzles scholars. Some think the esoteric form of writing emphasises the importance of astrology at Qumran,⁵⁴ but others think it has to do with secrecy and means that the contents of the text were contrary to accepted belief.⁵⁵

Still within Palestinian Judaism, but possibly of particular relevance to the subject under consideration is the zodiac on the floor of synagogues.⁵⁶ What this undoubted symbol of paganism was doing in synagogues has sparked a lively debate. Some scholars think it was a harmless piece of art work. Others think it was intended to signify the universe under God. Still others believe it served as a calendar.⁵⁷ However others see evidence of syncretistic tendencies. Urman and Flesher state that "the discovery of magic texts indicates that the border between orthodox Judaism and magical and astrological practices was somewhat blurred."⁵⁸ We have to reckon with the fact that Jewish attitudes to the use of pagan symbols changed over time,⁵⁹ but although pressure from Hellenisation eased with the decline of paganism ambivalence over external influences continued. Thus in the Dura synagogue the central image of Helios in the mosaic of the zodiac was replaced by Moses and in the synagogue at Sephoris Helios is

⁵⁴ M. Albani, "Horoscopes," *Encyclopaedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 371-2,

⁵⁵ Alexander, "Incantations and Book of Magic", 365.

⁵⁶ Cf.,e.g. D.Urman and P.V.N.Flesher, *Ancient Synagogues: Historical Analysis and Archaeological Discovery*, Leiden: E.J.Brill,1995.

⁵⁷ R. Hachlili, "The Zodiac in Ancient Jewish Art: Representation and Significance," *BASOR* 228 (1977) 61-77; see the discussion in,e.g, H.Shanks, *Judaism in Stone: The Archeology of Ancient Synagogues*, New York,etc., Harper & Row, 1979, 150-84.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 311.

⁵⁹ L.I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2000, 599 - 600.

substituted by an image of the sun, while in another synagogue the zodiac was covered over by a new flooring.⁶⁰ The same conclusion must be drawn from the Targum of Pseudo-Jonathan to Leviticus 26.1. It reads, "You may set mosaics with pictures and figures into the floor of your synagogues but you may not worship them, for I am the Lord your God".

In the rabbinic writings we find astrological beliefs frequently condemned and rejected, but as Charlesworth says, there are notable exceptions, especially *b.Shabbat* 156.⁶¹ On astrology in rabbinic writings Urbach goes so far as to say that "the actual value of astrology and its reality were beliefs shared by Tannaim and Amoraim."⁶²

It is interesting, as Urman and Flesher note, that the zodiac has not been found in churches in Palestine in the early Byzantine period.⁶³ Mosaics abounded in early churches of Palestine. They included representations of birds, animals, plants and of human figures usually depicting saints or benefactors of the church in question. Some of the mosaic designs resemble the zodiac circle with the sun and the moon at the centre and the twelve months of the year depicted by various figures. But the zodiac itself has not been

⁶⁰ E. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1952-68, 12,45,71; L.I.Levine and Z. Weiss, *From Durer to Sephoris: Jewish Art and Society in Late Antiquity* = Journal of Roman Archaeology, Supp. Series 40, Portsmouth, R.I., Thomson-Shore, 2000.

⁶¹ Charlesworth, *Op. cit.*, 189-99.

⁶² E.E.Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, Jerusalem: Magnus, 1975, I, 277.

⁶³ *Op. cit.*, 311; B. Kühnel, "The Synagogue Floor Mosaic in Sepphoris: Between Paganism and Christianity", Levine & Weiss, ed., *op.cit.*, 43.

found.⁶⁴ Hippolytus of Rome says that the apostles took the place of the twelve signs of the zodiac.⁶⁵

Finally, there is the evidence of the little known *Fragments of Artapanus*, preserved by Eusebius (*Praeparatio Evangelica*.18) and believed to come from the second century B.C. We are informed that Abraham taught astrology to Pharaoh (frag.1).⁶⁶ This is developed in *Pseudo-Eupolomus* from the period 100-150BC. It claims that Abraham taught astrology to the Egyptians (Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 9.17.8).⁶⁷

Conclusion

What I have offered is only a glimpse of the fascinating area now opening to us as a result of the work being done by scholars in Judaism researching in the interface between historic belief and paganism of the Greco-Roman period. It demonstrates the heterogeneous character of Judaism of the period and the way in which Jews were influenced by pagan beliefs. Jews like Josephus and Philo apparently had no difficulty in subordinating astrological ideas to their belief in the cosmocrator, but those represented by the *Treatise of Shem* and *Sepher ha- Razim* reveal a world from which God is effectively banished and is in the control of astrological powers and demons.

I want to suggest that it was such syncretism that John was inveighing against in Rev. 2.9 and 3.9. Those whom John criticised

⁶⁴ J.W.Crowfoot, *Early Churches in Palestine*, London: OUP, 1941, 119,127-8, 135-7 and Plate XIX.

⁶⁵ J. Danielou, *Primitive Christian Symbols*, London: Burns and Oates, 1961, 124-35.

⁶⁶ J.H.Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 2,1985, 897.

⁶⁷ Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 880 - 1.

no doubt believed that a more accommodating attitude towards things like sacrificial meat allowed greater freedom in socialising and greater access to employment and public office. But however reasonable the point of view that placed fewer restrictions upon people may have appeared to those John had in mind it was for him a blurring of the difference between faith and paganism that could only invite danger. For him all dalliance with the prevailing culture was quite out of the question. Those who called themselves Jews had forfeited the right to make such a claim. They had become the synagogue of Satan. This is the blasphemy of which John accuses them (3.9), the ultimate sin that puts them in league with the Beast (13.5-6). However harmless magic may have appeared to be in the eyes of some of his Jewish contemporaries it was anathema to John. He did not hesitate to consign those who practised it to the lake of fire (21.8) or to shut them out of the heavenly city (22.15). To quote Aune, "These explicit references...only partially reveal the depth of the struggle which John waged against the widespread beliefs and assumptions of Graeco-Roman magical revelation"⁶⁸

John was not alone in his concern. The author of Colossians was troubled by syncretism. Ignatius urged the Philadelphians to flee from magical arts (vi. 2) and he told the Ephesians that the incarnation of Jesus Christ meant the end of magic (xix.2). How John views the Jews he has in mind is similar to how he views the Balaamites, the Nicolaitans and the followers of Jezebel. In both cases they failed to make the boundaries clear. What John is saying about the Jews in 2.9 and 3.9 is all of a piece with his call to the churches in the main body of his work, "come out of her, my people, so that you take no part in her sins and do not share in her plagues" (18.4). John deals in black and white. There is no in-between. But if John appears to modern readers to be forcing people into a ghetto we have to point out that time and again it was

⁶⁸ D.Aune, "The Apocalypse of John and Graeco-Roman Revelatory Magic," *op.cit.*,494.

by entering the ghetto that Jews and Christians survived. As far as the church is concerned, John's writing marks the beginning of the long battle it was to wage with the prevailing culture. We have to thank him for sharpening the issues so that they are unmistakably clear even if they seem impossibly radical to us today.

R.J.McKelvey

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J. C. McCullough

This is the last index to be issued in printed form for *Irish Biblical Studies*¹. From this Issue on all indices (from the inception of the Journal in 1979) will be posted electronically on our website which is www.union.ac.uk/ and can also be sent on request to a subscriber as a MSWord attachment. We hope that in this way we will be able to provide a constantly up to date index for the Journal.

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Campbell, Denis	Review: <i>Preaching to every Pew. Cross-cultural Strategies</i> : by James R. Nieman and Thomas G. Rogers	24/1	2002	46-48
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J. C. McCullough

John Stott, *Why I Am A Christian* (Leicester: IVP, 2003), £7-99, pp.149, ISBN 9-780851-114071.

Was it William Temple who said: 'To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often'? Or is this my mistaken and fanciful recollection brought on by remembering, when reading this book, that David Edwards coupled Temple and John Stott together as the most influential English clergymen of the twentieth century? To read John Stott's new volume is to be reminded of the (doubtless intended) limits of the statement. For this is the John Stott that many have known and loved for many years, proclaiming what he has proclaimed for many decades. I recall his saying somewhere that he thought that William Temple was always an evangelist at heart (or am I now fancifully attributing something to John Stott?). This contribution makes us think that the same might be said of John Stott himself.

Its title must not mislead us into supposing that the book is about the man, rather than the convictions. He sets out, of course, the things that have persuaded him, but the focus is on what should be persuasive for all of us. After aligning himself with those conscious of the pursuit of the 'Hound of Heaven', he considers the claims of Christ, the cross of Christ, the paradox of our humanness, freedom and the fulfilment of our aspirations. The author concludes with an invitation to the reader to join him in acknowledging the lordship of Christ, persuaded that there are firm grounds for doing so. Many of us will recognise in these chapters the factors that we, too, have found persuasive, and they are explained with the author's customary clarity and transparency. Yet, as one profoundly indebted and grateful to John Stott for all that he has been and taught over the years, I think it is right to ask whether we should demur at one point, and that is in connection with the question of atonement.

John Stott speaks of forgiveness as being 'to God...the profoundest of problems' (Carnegie Simpson) and of a 'divine dilemma' in forgiveness, because of the need to 'act simultaneously to express his [God's] holiness and love' (p.55). It is a point made in John Stott's volume on *The Cross of Christ* too, where there is a whole chapter on 'The problem of forgiveness'. But we can question this

way of putting things, without thereby underestimating the gravity of sin. Scripture surely never presents God as one who has a 'problem' or 'dilemma' in the matter. If, for example, Hosea 11.8f. is read as though presenting a 'strife of attributes' in God (*The Cross of Christ*, p.129), how can we avoid reading Exodus 32, for example, according to the same general hermeneutical principle, as implying that God needed to be restrained by Moses from destroying His own people? I do not think that John Stott would wish to read it that way, though he might plead that his reading of Hosea does not entail it. At any rate, if there is a divine dilemma over forgiveness, we surely need to ask: when did it cease to be a dilemma for God and become resolved? No answer seems really satisfactory, for the cross is the time of God's action, but not the time of the problem's resolution, in the sense in which John Stott uses the term, for it was planned in advance.

The demurral may have to do only with the presentation, and not with the substance, of the doctrine of the atonement presented here. Yet there may also be more to it than preferred ways of describing the same thing. The question arises, in relation to *The Cross of Christ*, whether 'satisfaction' moves to the forefront, precisely as an answer to the dilemma, in a way that it might not have done had we started not with a 'problem', but with the biblical data itself, where 'satisfaction' does not immediately meet us on its surface. It goes without saying that this is not to impugn the biblical-centredness of John Stott's theology - a charge whose arrogance would be exceeded only by its absurdity. Nor is it to reject the essential contentions. It is, however, to ask whether reformulation on the matter of 'problem' and 'dilemma' would have wider ramifications, if we teased them out.

It is a reviewer's dubious privilege to hide behind such a question. This reviewer's greater privilege is to sit under the ministry of John Stott again, in reading this book, and be convinced anew of the truth of Jesus Christ and the glory of this truth.

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